DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 293 CE 082 273

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TITLE Urban Disadvantage and Provider Equity Strategies.
PUB DATE 2001-03-00
NOTE 12p.; In: Research to Reality: Putting VET Research To Work. Proceedings of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) Conference (4th, Adelaide, Australia, March 28-30, 2001); see CE 082 232.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.avetra.org.au/PAPERS%202001/McIntyre%20Egg.pdf.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Context Effect; Continuing Education; Developed Nations; *Disadvantaged; Educational Equity (Finance); Enrollment Influences; *Equal Education; Foreign Countries; Outcomes of Education; *Outreach Programs; Postsecondary Education; Poverty; Program Effectiveness; Research Methodology; Research Problems; Research Utilization; *Socioeconomic Status; Student Characteristics; Urban Education; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS *TAFE (Australia)

ABSTRACT

Current policy discourses on "equity" in VET tend to gloss over the nature of the socioeconomic disadvantage that underlies questions of the participation and achievement of the so-called "target equity groups." While indexes of socioeconomic disadvantage are widely applied in education, their application to VET participation is as problematic. Postcode participation studies of Sydney and Melbourne have shown there is strong participation and achievement in disadvantaged areas identified by such indexes. A key question, then, is how these patterns of participation result from the ethos and programs of those technical and further education (TAFE) providers responding to the needs of large VET clienteles in such areas. The analysis requires a multi-dimensional framework encompassing client characteristics, provider factors, and the way these interact in and are modified by the nature of the regional context. Research along these lines shows that an important focus of equity research needs to be the nature of the local clienteles that takes advantage of the programs that public providers customize in their knowledge of local disadvantage and the need for "equity." (Contains 22 references.) (Author/KC)

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ED 456 293

Urban disadvantage and provider equity strategies

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This paper explores the underlying problem of the meaning of 'disadvantage' in equity research in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. Current policy discourses of 'equity' in VET tend to gloss over the nature of the socio-economic disadvantage that underlies questions of the participation and achievement of the so-called 'target equity groups'. While indexes of socioeconomic disadvantage are widely applied in education, their application to VET participation is as problematic. Postcode participation studies of Sydney and Melbourne have shown there is strong participation and achievement in disadvantaged areas identified by such indexes. A key question then, is how these patterns of participation result from the ethos and programs of those TAFE providers responding to the needs of large VET clienteles in such areas. The analysis requires a multi-dimensional framework encompassing client characteristics, provider factors and the way these interact in and are modified by the nature of the regional context. Research along these lines shows that an important focus of equity research needs to be the nature of the local clienteles that takes advantage of the programs that public providers customise in their knowledge of local disadvantage and the need for 'equity'.

Disadvantaged areas and local VET clienteles

Recent research (McIntyre et al, in progress) has attempted to throw the spotlight on the question of the nature of the local clientele of TAFE, viewed in its regional context and in terms of the evolution of equity policy.

The terms 'local clientele' and 'regional context' signify the rediscovery of the 'community' in VET policy research, suppressed at the height of training reform and now rediscovered during an era of political reaction in the countryside. (The significance of the communitarian politics cannot, regrettably, be explored here, but see McIntyre in press).

A 'clientele' is a body of individual students (clients) that share particular social, economic and educational characteristics, who may be 'targeted' for participation attempts and to whom educational services, including equity programs, can be marketed. A local clientele is one that lives and participates in VET locally. The question of local clientele - who uses VET providers and why they do - is a key issue in the analysis of VET participation and now one receiving attention. From an equity perspective, it is important to identify the terms on which disadvantaged individuals are participating and whether they are achieving outcomes to the same degree as other clients.

There are some difficulties in defining 'disadvantage' in this context and its ambiguous relationship to the VET equity policy vocabulary. For this reason, we need to recount the policy history of 'equity' and trace its development from the

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earlier concept of disadvantage (and earlier terms of social deprivation or underprivilege).

'Disadvantage' is defined in socioeconomic terms. Though it has some problems, a useful contrast can be made between socioeconomic disadvantage and sociocultural characteristics. In studying 'local clientele' from disadvantaged areas, the prime interest is the employment and schooling levels. Such socioeconomic criteria provide the primary benchmark of disadvantage. It is also necessary of course to monitor sociocultural participation and its relationship to socioeconomic disadvantage, without confusing them. Sociocultural factors, including being Aboriginal or non-English speaking, may lead to lower education or employment levels that define socioeconomic disadvantage.

The localised nature of 'disadvantaged clientele' using TAFE and ACE providers has been established by a series of studies of participation in Sydney and Melbourne postcodes (McIntyre 1998, 1997, 2000b). These studies are made possible by the collection of student home postcodes in national VET statistics, an item that has relatively good data quality. Recent work has mapped VET participation onto patterns of 'urban disadvantage' as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indexes of socioeconomic disadvantage. These indexes, in brief, distinguish between more specific indexes based on economic (income and housing) or education-occupational factors (qualifications and occupational group). A full discussion of the application of ABS indexes of socioeconomic disadvantage can be found in McIntyre (2000a, 2000b).

One obvious trend from these studies is worth highlighting here (Tables 1 and 2). When Sydney or Melbourne postcodes were grouped by degree of disadvantage (sextiles), the greatest number of TAFE clients were found to be in the most disadvantaged postcodes. There were also other important differences in the educational and employment characteristics of the clients, and their sociocultural status (for example whether they are of non-English speaking background). It can be fairly concluded that TAFE clearly serves large groups of 'disadvantaged clientele' in these postcodes.

The Melbourne study (McIntyre 1999, 2000c) compared TAFE with adult community education (ACE) participation in over 2000 postcodes. This showed that while TAFE is concentrated in more disadvantaged postcodes, ACE participants are fairly equally distributed across the socioeconomic range. This points again to interesting questions about the socioeconomic characteristics of ACE clienteles, and continuing discussion about the role of different sectors. The study is consistent with the well-documented trend of ACE to attract large numbers of more advantaged clients (see McIntyre 2000c; McIntyre et al 1996).

Table 1: Disadvantage and VET participation, Sydney postcodes (1996)

Sextile	Total partic.	TAFE	Partic. rate (a)	Emply % (b)	Yr 10 % (c)	ATSI	NESB
1	50,944	1306	7.9	46.1	34.4	2.1	51.1
2	40,468	1038	6.9	54.2	34.1	3.0	36.8
3	25,341	618	7.0	57.7	33.8	2.4	27.5
4	29,369	734	6.9	60.6	32.4	2.2	21.1
5	20,944	537	6.4	62.7	29.4	1.8	15.5
6	19,810	495	4.9	62.2	22.0	1.7	19.0
All	186,876	785	6.7	57.3	31.0	2.2	28.4

Table 2: Disadvantage and VET participation, Melbourne postcodes (1996)

Sextile	Total TAFE partic.	Av. TAFE partic.	TAFE partic. rate (a)	Employ (b) %	Yr 10 or less % (c)	Total ACE partic.	Av. ACE partic.	TAFE-ACE ratio
1	51,380	1427.2	9.7	49.4	30.2	17,080	474.4	0.40
2	41,082	1081.1	8.8	58.5	28.1	16,170	425.5	0.44
3	30,389	799.7	8.4	56.0	29.1	12,915	339.9	0.52
4	29,061	764.8	8.9	56.0	26.5	14,374	378.3	0.54
5	33,140	872.1	7.6	53.1	20.5	19,600	515.8	0.75
6	19,960	486.8	6.8	51.2	18.5	16,206	395.3	0.93
All	205,012	895.2	8.3	54.1	25.4	96,345	420.7	0.60

Source: McIntyre (2000c). Sextiles grouped by Index of Socioeconomic Disadvantage. Legend: (a) = the number of 1996 TAFE students from the postcode as a proportion of persons aged 15 years and over; (b) = students self-employed or employed part-time or full-time; (c) = students with year 10 or less prior schooling as a proportion of all students. The last two rates ignore the 'not stated' numbers in each case.

A strong case then can be made for identifying disadvantaged 'regions' and analysing their local VET clientele, and more particularly in what respects these are disadvantaged clienteles. This kind of analysis is essential for developing a convincing analysis of the 'community benefits' of participation in VET, whether TAFE or ACE or private provision. Such an analysis is needed if the current interest in 'learning communities' and regional developments is to feed into VET policy and correct its recent neglect of the 'community dimension' of adult participation.

'Equity' and its policy history

How to conceptualise the analysis of local clienteles is a problem that first requires some troubling of the concepts of equity.

Although as Falk states (1999, p 47) there is a commonsense view that equity means equal - which means the same - as individuals are clearly not 'the same', equity is frequently taken out of 'the realm of the commonsense' and placed into the 'too hard basket'. So although most people hold and can express this commonsense view, it is commonsense (ie manifestly true) only to the extent to which it is not examined.

Beyond the commonsense view, equity is in fact a 'slippery, illusory notion, embedded in and so constrained by its ideological framings and popular mythologies' (Butler 1999, p 31), and equity policy and practice reflect this. Government policy has had a major role in developing equity practices in VET through both funding regimes (TAFE, National Training Reform Agenda) and various commissions into related areas (Fitzgerald Report, Henderson Report). In the last decade in particular, equity policy and practice critique, analysis and research have contributed to the development of a broader view. The emphasis of the activities of government and researchers is always to explore and develop two related and enmeshed issues. The first issue is that of equity as an expression of 'educational fairness' or a 'fair go for all'. This is the debate around funding levels, targeted versus mainstream programs and individualised versus community development responses. The second issue is one of effectiveness and the search for specific strategies that do deliver equity outcomes and also involves the search for satisfactory measures of the outcomes of these strategies. Practitioners' responsibility then is to take the policy rhetoric of 'target equity groups', 'key performance measures' and so on and develop their own commonsense (and actionable) view of equity.

Various approaches or lenses have been used to look at equity in VET. Butler and Ferrier (2000) suggest that equity policy should be interrogated for its role in enabling a 'screening' of the privileges of the 'norm' as well as acting as an organising principle through which equity or justice can be 'distributed'. Powles and Anderson (1997) suggest an approach to equity provision that examines the underlying goals of provision and whether policy and practice serve a social service role (ie whether they are based on the nature of disadvantage) or whether they serve an economic utility role and are based on the levels of disadvantage. In many Economic Union countries, in particular in Britain, use of the term 'equity' has largely been replaced by 'social exclusion'. This concept is a response to globalisation and highlights the reignition of the social and economic divisions between those who benefit from the new economy and those who are 'left behind' or excluded. It is a concern for the costs of social alienation.

Equity appears in VET policy in varying guises. The storyline of contemporary equity policy is of a person lifting themselves from the social and economic ignominy of the dole queue or single parent's benefit to the buying power and opportunities of a well-paid job. Through their participation in VET and hence the labour market, individuals become respected and valuable members of society. In contrast, some earlier policies (especially in the 70s and early 80s) emphasised the need for an

appropriate response to address poverty. Reform measures reflected a concern to overhaul the state and its institutions as the key to overcoming the poverty that was at the heart of uneven life experiences. The Kangan and Fitzgerald reports reflect that view of equity policy development.

Each of these contrasting snapshots of VET equity policy is underpinned by a different concept of equity. On the one hand, there is a view of the individual who (simply) needs help to overcome barriers and gain access to a multitude of opportunities. But on the other hand, in the 70s example, equity is seen to be impossible to achieve without addressing the inequity of the systems supporting the state. Yet another view, perhaps a Marxist view of equity, would suggest that without changing the capitalist state itself, equity is not possible. Thus the concept of equity is highly variable in meaning, which reflects origins based on different paradigms or modes of thinking about society. Each paradigm attributes the causes of disadvantage to a different foundational cause, and is grounded in a different political and philosophical ideology. Each provides an explanation of multiple forms of social disadvantage - economic, social, political and cultural.

Table 3 is an attempt to present an interpretation of the relationship of these concepts to underlying social theory.

Table 3: Concepts of equity (after Egg, in progress)

Strategies to promote equity in VET	Equity strategies not needed: provide welfare to those who are unable to support themselves.	Provide access courses and 'second chance' education opportunities to enable people to move in from the margins.	Manage diversity, address social exclusion through close connections between welfare and the labour market.	Remove barriers to increase the level of representation of target groups.	Go out to the people, work with them to identify and develop tools to empower collective social action.
Role of work	Work and equity do not have an association.	Work is how people express their value to society.	Welfare is through work.	Work is an important aspect of people's lives - all people have the right to work.	All people have the right to participate in work under healthy and suitably valued conditions.

Focus or goal of equity	Opportunities are available to all; there is a natural order to society and only some can benefit.	Develop each individual to maximise his/her economic potential. Enable individuals to improve themselves, thus they will have access to the benefits of society, improving their return to society through increased productivity. Avoid waste of talent.	(Individual choice) Social exclusion is a failure of the relationship between the individual and society and arises through problems of resource allocation. It also involves power relations, culture and social identity.	(Distributive justice - Rawls) Make the education system accessible to the individual. By redistributing resources, inequalities can be addressed.	(Social justice) Non-dominant groups should be supported and resourced to develop tools to challenge an oppressive system
Dominant policy tools, issues	Maintains the status quo, social and class reproduction.	Utilises human capital, managerialism.	Allows/enables the marketplace to dictate. Economic rationalism, mutual obligation.	Addresses social disadvantage, arbitrates between competing interests in society.	Requires change in economic system, in order to effect change in social relations and institutional processes.
Political ideology	Conservatism	Neo-conservatism	Neo-liberalism	Liberal/liberal humanism	Socialism, radical socialism

The divisions should not be viewed as rigid. In particular, although a strategy (eg target equity groups) may emerge through one view of society (ie distributive justice), it may well be considered a suitable (or pragmatic) strategy through another lens (such as economic rationalism). However, such a representation of concepts can offer an indication of the sources of some of the stresses involved at the levels of both policy development and policy implementation.

The table was constructed through examination of various strategies for addressing equity issues and also various perceptions of work. The role of work is included in the recognition that it has become a key component in current views of equity concepts. More broad connections are then made with the overall focus or goal of equity strategies in the education system and then some of the broader policy issues associated with each of the parent ideologies that are set out on the final line. The table could have been presented in reverse order ie with 'political ideology' the starting point. However, this 'view' is intended to give a model for the process of interrogating practice in the search for underlying influences (Egg, in progress). One important limitation of such a table is that it fails to take account of the contextualised nature of equity practice. Such practice may be equally influenced by prevailing macro or micro level policies, resource availability, organisational flexibility and so on as it is by underlying concepts. Examining this interplay is the project of the NREC research.

Conceptualising provider equity strategies

Past work on equity policy since the period of training reform has focused on the client perspective, identifying and describing target groups such as indigenous Australians, women, people with a disability, people from a non-English speaking background and more recently, among 'emerging' classifications - people with a mental illness, people from rural areas, prisoners and mature age workers facing a restructured workplace. Specific equity strategies, including the development of appropriate pathways and options, are then based on the group profile.

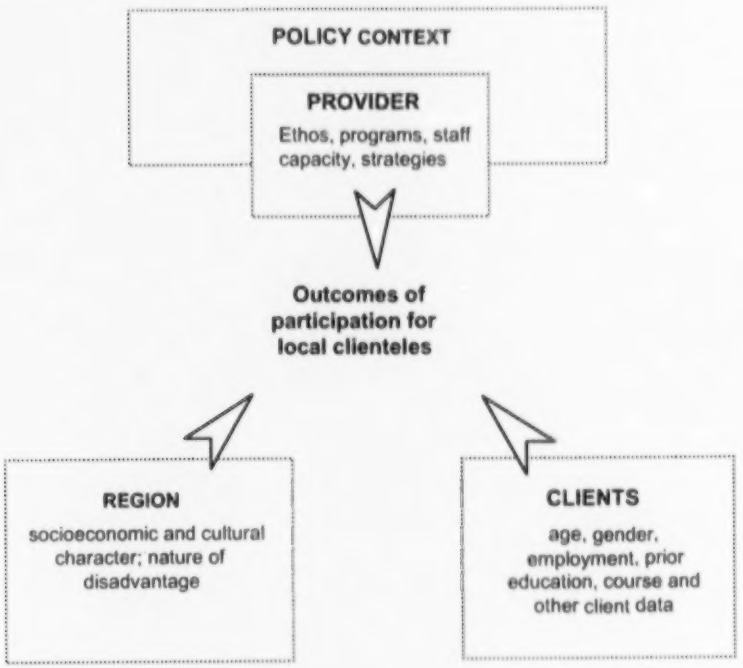
However, from a perspective of urban disadvantage, it is necessary to locate 'the disadvantaged' in a local and regional context. The abstract social space that is implied in the language of 'target equity group representation' needs to be replaced by a focus on local clientele that come from disadvantaged urban areas (leaving aside questions of non-metropolitan regions). To take this perspective is to ask how disadvantaged people in urban areas access the system and what benefits they derive from their participation in TAFE in large numbers, according to the studies reported earlier (McIntyre 2000b, 2000c).

Such research needs a robust framework to understand how participation and outcomes are achieved through a complex set of interactions among specific client characteristics, provider equity strategies and locality factors. This framework brings together client, provider and regional perspectives on equity research.

Most importantly, such a framework reinstates the provider in the analysis, since institutions, or rather the professionals that work within (and beyond) them, are agents who propound and pursue strategies designed to achieve equity in the system. How professionals 'strategise around equity' in disadvantaged Sydney and Melbourne TAFE catchments is highly researchable.

A framework for research is needed if we are to grasp how equity is produced through an interaction between providers and clients, mediated by socioeconomic and cultural influences in particular localities, including the labour market, transport and other community infrastructure, population movements and so on. How then do we conceptualise a framework that would allow us to rediscover (for it was lost in a period of training reform) the 'community dimension' of equity policy (McIntyre 2000a)?
The broad parameters are suggested by Figure 1 (based on McIntyre 2000a, and see also McIntyre et al 1996) suggests one possible schematisation.

Figure 1: Framework for analysis of equity in local participation


POLICY CONTEXT
PROVIDER
Ethos, programs, staff capacity, strategies
Outcomes of participation for local clienteles
REGION
socioeconomic and cultural character; nature of disadvantage
CLIENTS
age, gender, employment, prior education, course and other client data

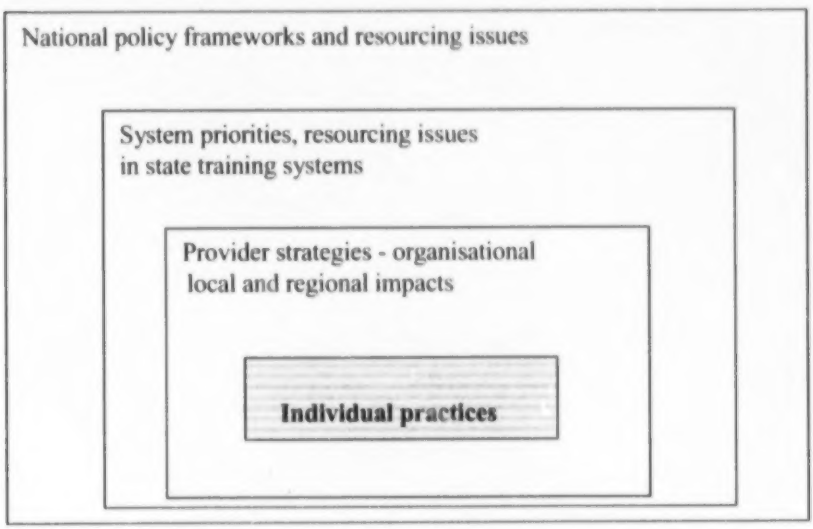
A variation of this kind of multi-dimensional framework is that proposed by our current NREC-funded research (McIntyre et al, in progress). The three dimensions are referred to as client, provider and regional perspectives on equity research. *Client perspectives* refer to the dominant concept of 'equity target groups' and the factors that compound disadvantage, creating barriers to access, retention and success that are often exacerbated by systemic and institutional barriers. *Provider perspectives* highlight the role of the provider in generating equity outcomes through delivering or brokering 'workable solutions' at the local level to generate desired outcomes. It focuses on what is required to customise equity strategies for local disadvantaged clienteles, including the development of pathways and options. *Regional perspectives* emphasise that equity in the VET system is constrained by great social and economic variations within the capital cities and between urban and regional and rural communities, recognising that differing labour market, employment and sociocultural factors impinge on the 'provider-client interactions' already referred to.

VET providers take these local and specific conditions into account and include the issues that arise as part of their practice in constructing responses to equity policies. Thus, there is a need for a further level of analysis to examine the active roles that professionals play in making their organisation responsive to the local context.

Figure 2 attempts to suggest how particular localised and responsive equity strategies are 'nested' within larger policy, resourcing and professional rationales that 'construct' the provider, depicted by policy as 'delivering' outcomes.

It is at this level that our NREC research is attempting to uncover the 'agency' of the TAFE Institute in producing equity outcomes for the local disadvantaged clienteles through programs that respond to the characteristics of these clients. Though it is not usually regarded as customisation, it is precisely that (see ANTA 1998).

Figure 2: The 'nesting' of equity practices within TAFE policy


National policy frameworks and resourcing issues
System priorities, resourcing issues in state training systems
Provider strategies - organisational local and regional impacts
Individual practices

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to build on past work that attempts to locate equity in VET participation in its regional or 'community' context. There is still much to explore in this area, now that there is an increasing policy interest in learning communities and the re-discovery of regional development as a policy frame for VET. The national key centre program of the UTS Research Centre for VET will this year be exploring the development of learning communities in four Australian capital cities.

What emerges from the work on urban disadvantage in urban localities in Sydney and Melbourne is the importance of a concept of 'local equity clienteles'. This concept highlights the way residents in a given disadvantaged area benefit from the strategies of providers that recognise both their needs and characteristics and the characteristics of the region, to modify what is possible in the way of equity outcomes: increased skill levels, employment opportunities, entry to further education and so on.

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